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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 ISTANBUL 000394

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TAGS: PREL IZ KDEM PGOV TU

SUBJECT: IRAQI OFFICIALS MEET IN ISTANBUL TO CREATE DEVELOPMENT PLAN FOR SAMARRA

REF: A. BAGHDAD 224

1B. BAGHDAD 1974

1C. BAGHDAD 409

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¶1. Summary. On July 17-19, 26 Iraqi men and women gathered in Istanbul to create a development plan for the City of Samarra, where in 2006 the bombing of the Golden Mosque initiated two years of country-wide sectarian violence. Attendees included the provincial governor, members of the provincial and city councils, police and army commanders, and representatives of NGOs and the religious community. At the end of the conference, the attendees had agreed upon all major elements of the development plan. The cooperation displayed by the participants contrasts vividly with the mistrust and accusations that have characterized the past two years (REF B). End summary.

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Background  
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¶12. The province of Salah ad Din (SAD), located immediately north of Baghdad, has a population of just under one million persons. The provincial capital is Tikrit, home town of Saddam Hussein. Samarra is the province's largest city, housing a quarter of a million people. Samarra's predominantly Sunni Arab population sees itself as among the biggest losers of the change of regime, with many highly educated and experienced former officials now unemployed and pensionless.

¶13. Samarra is a strategic city, a Sunni town famous for its Shia shrine, the Al-Askari or Golden Mosque, previously a source of much revenue from Shia tourism. On February 22, 2006, the golden dome of the mosque was destroyed by a terrorist bombing, setting off riots and reprisal attacks across the country that almost plunged Iraq into civil war. On June 13, 2007, suspected al-Qaeda terrorists attacked the mosque again and destroyed the two minarets flanking the dome's ruins.

¶14. Security, while not yet satisfactory, has improved tremendously in Samarra this year (REF A). General Rasheed, Commander of the Samarra Operations Center, told us that as a result of the Prime Minister's recent campaign, militia infiltration of the security forces has been reduced by a factor of 10. Accordingly, the GOI and international community are trying to seize the opportunity, not only to reconstruct the shrine (UNESCO and UNOPS are engaged (REF C), in close cooperation with the SAD PRT satellite housed at Patrol Base Olsen), but also, crucially, to improve the quality of life for the people of Samarra, who feel they have been neglected and who desire a return to normalcy, with all the pilgrimage trade that normalcy entails.

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The Istanbul Conference

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¶15. The Istanbul Conference, organized by the SAD PRT and sponsored by UNDP with funds provided by the EU, was structured to bring together Samarra/Governate GOI officials and citizens to engage in free and frank discussion of the issues facing the city, and to develop a common vision for the future of the city. The Provincial Council has enacted a nominal development plan for the Province, but it is project-and spoils-based, with concomitant lack of focus and results. The Samarra Development Plan, by contrast, will be integrated, long-term (3-5 years), and based upon the shared vision of the Conference participants.

¶16. The agenda for the three-day event included a discussion of the current state of the city; breakout sessions on governance, public services, social services and economic development; and the drafting of an agreement on a common vision of the future direction of the city and surrounding area. Urban planning experts from UNDP facilitated the conference and provided technical assistance.

¶17. One key to the success of the Conference was the inclusion of high level representatives of all stakeholders -- Central, provincial and local government, military and police, as well as the religious and NGO communities. Equally important, participants arrived at the conference prepared to work together to find common ground, rather than to defend their parochial interests. As Gen. Rasheed proclaimed, the renewal of Samarra was "for the benefit of all Iraq." This cooperative attitude is the result of three months of preparatory work put into the Conference by the SAD PRT and its Samarra Team Lead, and demonstrates the wisdom of having the Samarra Team Lead based in the city and close to the people he advises.

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¶18. Over the years, Amman conference facilities have become increasingly booked, and Iraqi conference organizers are turning to Istanbul as a convenient "offsite" location in which to hold meetings. Although the GOT was not involved in this conference, we are beginning to investigate the advisability of involving the GOT in such events, where appropriate.

¶19. This cable has been cleared by the SAD PRT.  
OUDKIRK